

BERTHINE'S CAPTIVES.

Nothing was to be heard in the forest save the rustling of the snow falling upon the cedars as it had been falling since midday, a fine, powdery snow that spread upon the branches a frozen moss, upon the fir a coating of silver and upon the roads and pathways an immense carpet, soft as velvet, and which intensified the stillness of the sea of trees.

Before the door of a forester's hut a young woman with her sleeves rolled up to the elbows was cutting wood with an axe upon a stone. Tall, supple and strong, she was a true daughter of the forest and the child and wife of a forester. Suddenly a voice came from the interior of the house:

"We are alone this evening, Berthine; come in and make everything fast. These may be Prussians as well as wolves in the forest to-night."

The wood chopper responded with a resounding stroke of the axe.

"I have nearly finished, mother," she said; "besides, there is no need of fear yet if it is still daylight." Nevertheless, she leaped in her fagots and sticks of wood, and going again to the chimney corner went out again to close up the shed, then re-entering the room she pushed the door and locked and bolted it.

Her mother, an old and wrinkled woman whose age had made timid and nervous, was seated by the fire-side spinning.

"I do not like it, Berthine," said she; "when your father is from home, two women are not strong."

"But I am not afraid," the girl responded; "I can defend myself from a wolf or a Prussian all the same, and she glanced significantly at a huge revolver suspended above the chimney piece."

Berthine's husband had been in the army ever since the beginning of the Prussian invasion, and these two women had remained alone with only the old father, Nicholas Pichon, the gamekeeper, as he was called in the neighborhood, who had obstinately refused to leave his dwelling and seek protection in the city.

The city nearest the Pichon hut was Bethel, a quiet and ancient place perched upon a high rock. Filled with patriotism, the citizens had decided to resist invaders—to shut themselves up, and if necessary sustain a siege such as had taken place in the time of their forefathers—for twice already the inhabitants of Bethel, in the days of Henry IV and Louis XIV, had rendered themselves thus illustrious. Purchasing a supply of cannon and guns, equipping a militia, and forming themselves into battalions and companies, they exercised daily on the Place d'Armes. Bakers, grocers, butchers, notaries, lawyers, cabinet makers, librarians and even druggists maneuvered in turn at the registration hour under the command of M. Lavigne, an ex-officer of dragoons, and to-day, thanks to his having married the daughter and heiress of the shopkeeper, Bardon, the richest and most influential man in the city.

And thus they patiently waited the Prussians, the Prussians who never came, though twice they had been seen in the forest, in the neighborhood of Pichon's hut, who had run to warn the city.

This house of Nicholas Pichon served as a sort of advance post in the forest of Aveline, and twice a week the old man went into the city to purchase provisions and to carry to the citizens the latest news of the campaign.

His errand to Bethel to-day was to announce that a small detachment of German infantry had halted near his house about 2 o'clock that morning. They did not remain long, nor did he know the direction they had taken, but all the same, as soon as they had gone again Pichon called his dogs and started for the city, instructing his wife and daughter to bolt and barricade the house when night should fall, and on no account to open the door, no matter who might knock.

Berthine was afraid of nothing, but the old woman trembled and continually repeated: "It will end badly—you will see—it will end badly, sure!" and to-night she seemed more uneasy than usual.

"Knowest thou at what hour thy father will return?" she said to her daughter, presently.

"Not before 11, certainly. When father dines with the major commandant (the title Lavigne had conferred upon himself), he never returns till late," and Berthine hung her head over the fire and prepared to make the soup. All at once she ceased to stir it; she was listening to an indistinct noise that came down the flue of the chimney.

"Someone is walking in the wood," she said; "some bright people at least."

The old woman, frightened to death, stopped her wheel and began to whimper.

"Mon Dieu, Berthine!" she cried; "and thy father is from home!"

But Berthine did not reply, for at the moment there was a knock at the door, and a guttural voice demanded admittance.

"Open or I'll break to pieces," the same voice shouted a little later. Slipping the revolver into her pocket, the young woman crossed the room and, placing her mouth to the keyhole, shouted in return: "And who are you?" "A detachment from the forest side!" "Well, what do you want?" "Sometimes to eat; I have peen less since morning in to woods; open or I'll break to pieces!"

Without waiting for him to put his threat into execution, she slipped the bolts, the door swung heavily upon its hinges, and she saw in the pale, snorty light of the forest a group of soldiers standing upon the step—the same, in fact, she had seen the evening before.

"This is no time of night to ask for food," she continued, in a resolute tone; "besides, I am alone in the house, with only my mother."

"That is nothing," replied the officer, who seemed to be a good sort of a fellow, "we shall do you no harm, but we must have something to eat; we fall out hunger and fatigue."

"Very well, then," she responded, "enter, and I will see what I can do."

The men appeared, as the officer had said, to be worn out with hunger and fatigue. They had played their guns and caps in the corner, and now sat about the table watching with the eager looks of half starved animals the preparations for the pot-au-feu which Berthine was engaged in making. The old mother, every now and then turning a frightened glance upon the invading soldiers, had resumed her spinning, and nothing was heard in the room but the light whirring of the rolling wheel and the bubbling of the water in the pot.

They ate voraciously, their mouths spread to their widest extent in an effort to swallow the more, and their round eyes opening and shutting with every movement of their jaws. The noise they made in swallowing sounded like the gurgling of a water pipe. As they were thirsty as well as hungry, Berthine at last descended to the cellar to draw them some cider. To reach it she was obliged to pass a low vaulted chamber or cave, used, so they said, during the revolution as a prison or place of concealment. You could only enter it by a narrow stairway

leading from the floor of the kitchen, closed by a heavy door.

Berthine was gone a long time to draw the cider, and when she reappeared she was laughing—laughing softly to herself. Soon the soldiers had finished their supper and were nodding around the table. Every now and then a head would fall upon the boards with a resounding thud.

"You can stretch yourselves by the fire, if you like," said the forester, kindly. "Mother and I will climb to the upper floor."

A moment later a key turned in the lock overhead—there was the sound of footsteps on the floor, and then—silence.

With their feet to the fire and their heads supported upon their knapsacks, the Prussians were soon snoring loudly. They had slept perhaps an hour, when suddenly there was the report of a gunshot, another and another, loud and near. They leaped to their feet as the door of the stairs leading to the upper floor was thrown open and Berthine appeared, bare footed, half clad and wild with fright.

"It is the French," she cried, "at least a hundred of them! For the love of God, go into the cellar and make no noise; if you do, we are lost!"

"I will, I will," the officer stammered, bewildered and excited, "but how can we get down?"

She lifted the trap in the floor, disclosing the narrow stairs, and the six men quickly disappeared. When the brim of the last hat had vanished from sight, Berthine replaced the wooden flap, as thick as a wall and hard as steel, fastened it with a monstrous bolt and began to laugh again; to laugh like a maniac, as she softly danced above the heads of her prisoners shut up in their box of stone.

She looked down at the silent as and as they had promised to be silent as the tomb, knowing that they were perfectly secure and well supplied with air through a vent in the wall guarded by a strong iron grating, she gave herself no further concern regarding them, but set about replenishing the fire and the pot of soup in readiness for her father's return.

It was not long, however, before she heard them stirring under her feet and the sound of talking. Berthine listened; it was clear that the Prussians were beginning to suspect the ruse and would soon demand release. She was not mistaken, for a moment later someone stumbled upon the winding stairs and began to beat upon the trap with his fists. "Open to us, open it, I say," shouted the voice of the inebriated one, "or I'll break it in!"

"Break it in, my good man," Berthine answered tauntingly, mimicking his broken accent; "break it in, by all means!" But the effort was useless; their fists, the butt ends of their muskets and all their kicks and poundings were powerless to release them; that door was stout enough to have defied a catapult. Convinced of this at last, they again descended and once more all was silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantel shelf. As the hands pointed to the midnight hour a distant baying was heard in the forest and the young woman arose and opened the door. The figures of a man and the two enormous dogs were approaching across the snow.

"Do not pass before the vent hole, father," said she, as soon as he was near enough to hear her; "there are Prussians in the cellar."

"Prussians in the cellar?" Nicholas Pichon replied astounded. "Prussians in the cellar? What are they doing in the cellar, child? Tell me, quick!"

"They are the same you saw yesterday," she responded. "They were in the forest and are in the cellar now because I put them there!" and she frightened him by firing off the old revolver and then, through fear, caged them in the unused prison hole.

"As soon as you have eaten, father," she continued, "you must return and bring the major commandant and the troops; he will be very happy to receive the prisoners."

The old man agreed, and taking his seat at the table eagerly consumed his soup while Berthine attended to the dogs and twenty minutes from the time of their arrival they were on their way back to Bethel, the forester waiting alone.

The prisoners had once more consumed their supper, eating, shouting and beating their guns against the walls of the prison hole. At last they began to fire through the grating, doubtless hoping to attract the attention of some passing detachment which might chance to be in the neighborhood. Berthine paid no attention to the noise, however, save to caution her mother to remain in her chamber; but a wicked anger took possession of her and she would cheerfully have sacrificed her life, if only to keep them quiet.

Her father had now been gone an hour and a half. Surely he had reached the city and the troops were on the way. She pictured to herself the air of pride with which he related the affair to the commandant, all fire and excitement as he called for his sword and uniform. She even fancied that she heard the drums as they rolled through the streets, calling the citizens to the colors and the march in the snow. Surely another hour would see them here, the prisoners taken and the troops triumphantly returning to the city.

But how long it seemed, how the hours dragged, and how the clock ticked faintly crawled around the dial! Nevertheless, the moment for their return came at last. Berthine got up from her seat and threw open the door. Out upon the white carpet of the forest a dark object was visible crawling towards her. She was alarmed and called out: "Father, is it thou?"

"Yes, I," he returned; "I am sent in advance to see if anything has changed since my departure."

"No," she responded, "all is the same."

Pichon, placing a whistle to his lips, sent forth into the night a long, shrill blast, and soon, in the mist rising beneath the trees, Berthine saw the figures of a band of men, the advance guard of the arriving troops.

"But don't pass before the vent hole!" Pichon shouted, as the men appeared; and "Don't pass before the vent hole!" solemnly repeated the soldiers to those behind. Soon the whole troop was visible to the young woman, a hundred strong, each man carrying in his belt 200 cartridges, and led by Lavigne himself.

Placing his men in a line around the house, with a liberal space before the hole leading to the cellar, the major commandant valiantly entered the house to inform himself as to the strength and attitude of the enemy, now so quiet that it seemed as if they had flown. Pounding heavily upon the door above the prisoners' heads he called aloud: "M. Officer—M. Prussian Officer—I wish to speak to you." The German did not reply. "Tis funny," said Lavigne to himself, "very funny," pounding again and receiving no response. For twenty minutes more he continued to call upon them—to knock and pound and summon them to surrender, but without the slightest sign from the enemy of either consent or hostility.

In the meantime the soldiers cooled their heels in the snow outside, faithfully

guarding the vent hole, slapping their hands to keep them from freezing, and with a childish but constantly increasing desire to cross before it simply because forbidden to do it.

Suddenly one of them, bolder than the rest, and who ran like a deer, made the attempt. It was successful; the imprisoned Prussians seemed as if dead. Emboldened by their comrade, another and another followed in his steps. It had become a game, or a race for life in which the devil would take the hindmost.

They had lighted a tremendous fire to keep themselves from freezing, and the ruddy glare of the flame fell full upon the laughing faces of those prankish guards as they voyaged rapidly from left to right and from right to left again. All at once someone called out: "Matheson, it is now your turn; come, hurry, my boy; hurry up!"

Now, I must tell you that Matheson was the baker of Bethel, an enormously fat man, whose inflated stomach, big as an ordinary balloon, furnished unending merriment for his frolicsome comrades. He hesitated and tried to draw out of the race, but they jeered and mocked him till he, too, started, and leaped with a little-muzzling start that shook his paunch like jelly, across the intervening space.

The whole detachment laughed until they cried, shouting and urging him on with a storm of bravos and encouraging words.

Half way across the open space a large red flame darted from the vent hole, a sharp detonation followed, and the big Rether baker fell upon his nose, with a ball in his thigh. As no one rushed to succor him he dragged himself on his hands and knees until out of reach of the balls, then quietly fainted away, more from fright than pain of the wound, for the ball had scarcely more than ploughed the flesh below the thigh bone. At the sound of the musket shot the major commandant rushed from the house.

"Tinsmiths!" he roared, "tinsmiths, come forward!"

A man, followed by two others, stepped from the ranks and stood before the commandant. "Take the gutters from the house," said he, "and bring them here."

A few moments later twenty metres of water pipe lay at his feet. Then, with a thousand precautions, a hole was chipped in the corner of the trap door, the end of the water pipe inserted, and the other end fastened to the spout of the pump.

"The Prussians can stand a great deal," cried M. Lavigne with a beaming smile, "but it remains to be seen if they can stand the drink we shall give them. Pump, my boys, pump with a will, and with a wild hurrah the men obeyed. Soon a silvery stream of water flowed along the tubing and fell to the cellar below with the murmuring of a summer cascade. Hour after hour ran by, and still the water fell and still the enemy held the ground, though every now and then a stamping of feet and curses loud and deep came from the depths below.

About 8 o'clock in the morning a voice suddenly came from the cellar calling for the commandant. "I wish to speak with him at once," "Do you surrender?" shouted Lavigne, bending to the floor. "If so, pass up your arms." A hand came out of the hole and a musket fell at his feet; another and another, until finally a voice cried: "We have no more, make haste and stop to pump; we drown our water."

The commandant had the pump stopped, and the soldiers, crowding about the trap as the bolts were withdrawn, watched the Germans ascend, six white heads with water soaked hair and a half drowned stare in their pale blue eyes.

As they feared to be surprised the Retherites did not linger, but started for the city, one half of the column bearing the other half bearing Matheson extended upon a mattress supported by poles.

For the bravery and gallantry with which M. Lavigne had captured "the advance guard of the Prussian army," as Rether papers quoted it, he was decorated with the cross of honor, while Matheson received a medal. For Berthine nothing could be done; she was only a woman, and it was impossible to adorn her as a warrior. Translated from the French of Guy de Maupassant for New York Mercury.

Persia's Minister of Public Printing. The said edouche, or minister of public printing, is a functionary who is often elected with the shah to be his censor and nominal editor of the official journals. It is said that nothing goes into these periodicals without first passing under the eye of the shah. But as they appear only monthly and cover but four pages in large type, the task of editing is more apparent than real.

The said edouche also assists the shah in editing his journals of travel and preparing them for the press. The most recent work of this description is the account of the shah's excursion to Mesched in 1882, in which the royal author gives some of his own conclusions concerning the antiquities along the route he followed.

The work is illustrated with lithographic illustrations of the monuments and ruins. These works as well as the official gazettes are printed by lithography. This may seem a somewhat laborious and unnecessary process at the present age, for the casting of Arabic characters, which the Persians use, has been often done, and several volumes have been printed in India in the Persian language from metal types.

Hence the preference for lithography, which approximately gives them the delicate touches of the calligraphic art. A skillful scribe writes out each page as it is to appear in the printed copy. This is photographed on a stone with a prepared surface.—S. W. G. Benjamin.

Mistaken Treatment of Colds. The Monthly Magazine (London) reports Dr. Graham as saying that it is not a correct practice, after a cold is caught, to make the room a person sits in much warmer than usual, to increase the quantity of bed clothes, wrap up in blanket, and drink a large quantity of hot tea, or other slops, because it will invariably increase the feverishness and in the majority of instances prolong rather than lessen the duration of the cold. It is well known that confining inoculated persons in warm rooms will make their smallpox more violent, by augmenting the general heat of the fever, and it is for the same reason that a similar practice in the present complaint is attended with analogous results, a cold being in reality a slight fever. In some parts of England, among the lower classes, people are in the habit of glass of cold spring water, taken on going to bed, is found to be a successful remedy, and in fact many medical practitioners recommend a reduced atmosphere and frequent draughts of cold fluid as the most efficacious remedy for a recent cold, particularly when the patient's habit is full and plethoric.

At a Paris menagerie. Spectators chatting with the wife of the lion tamer: "Is it true, madam, that a lion costs 5,000 francs?" "That depends; there are lions and lions."

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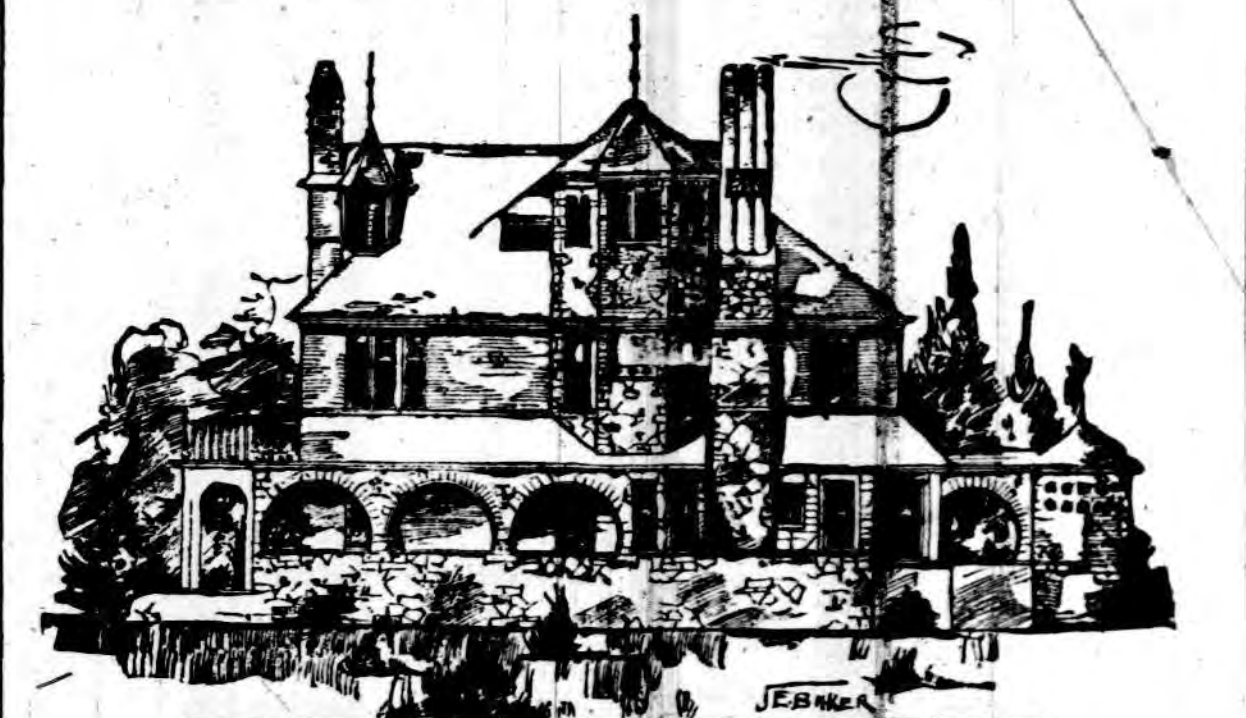
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